

The University of Chicago

A NEW SOURCE FOR LANCELOT'S
MADNESS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

1931

By
DOROTHY WINTERS

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A NEW SOURCE FOR LANCELOT'S MADNESS

By DOROTHY WINTERS

It has been pointed out by James Douglas Bruce¹ that the account of Lancelot's temporary insanity in the *Prose Lancelot*,² Part III, 399 ff., is largely based upon the madness of Yvain in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Lot³ suggests as an additional source the legend of St. Alexis. The first of these incidents undoubtedly, the second possibly, influenced the *Prose Lancelot* episode. Neither of them, however, presents a sufficiently consistent parallel to establish it as the sole source.

In *Robert le Diable*,⁴ a romance written toward the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century,⁵ occurs an

¹ *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings down to the Year 1300* (Göttingen, 1923), I, 407.

² H. Oskar Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, III-V (*Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*), Washington, D. C., 1912.

³ F. Lot, *Étude sur le Lancelot en Prose* (Paris, 1918), p. 186.

⁴ Ed. by E. Löseth, Paris, 1903. This romance is one of the earliest versions of the legend of Robert the Devil. See *ibid.*, Introduction, pp. xvii ff., and Karl Breul (ed.), *Sir Gowther* (Oppeln, 1886), pp. 45 ff.

The relation to the Robert the Devil cycle of the Irish *Imram Hua Corra* (ed. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique*, XIV [1893], 22 ff.) is obscure. The Irish story, which may be much earlier in date than the romance of *Robert le Diable*, differs from it in that it lacks the episode of the Three Days' Combat, which is an essential element of the Robert the Devil story. On the *Imram Hua Corra*, see Ronald S. Crane, "An Irish Analogue of the Legend of Robert the Devil," *Romanic Review*, V (1914), 55, and H. Zimmer, "Keltische Beiträge," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum*, XXXIII, 200 ff.

⁵ Löseth, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. xlvii, thinks the romance appears to have been written at the end of the twelfth century. Bernhard Deister

incident which parallels the madness of Lancelot more closely in detail than does either of the texts previously suggested. Not only do the details in the two passages correspond, but they occur in the same order, even to minor points. This similarity is made all the more striking by the fact that the situations leading up to the episode in the two romances are not at all similar.

In *Robert le Diable*, a noble lady, who has long prayed in vain for a child, at length seeks the aid of the devil, promising to dedicate her offspring to him. The son born to her is so fiendishly wicked that he comes to be known as Robert the Devil. After a long career of murder, rapine, and villainy, Robert becomes aware of the circumstances of his birth, experiences a change of heart, and sets out for Rome to seek absolution of the Pope. He is sent by the Pope to confess his sins to a hermit, who imposes upon him the following penance: during a period of ten years he must feign to be mad; he must pretend to be mute; and he may eat only what he can snatch from the jaws of dogs. He is to begin his penance by going to Rome, where he is to cause himself to be pursued through the streets as a madman. Carrying out these instructions, Robert, after a humiliating flight through the city, takes refuge at the court of the Emperor of Rome, where he becomes a kind of court fool. During Robert's residence at court, the Emperor is besieged by the Turks. Robert, anxious to take part in the battle but unable to do so because of his humble rôle, goes to a fountain in the garden to weep and pray. Unknown to Robert, the princess watches him and realizes he is not what he seems. An angel appears, provides Robert with armor, and commands him to take part in the battle. Robert puts the enemy to rout, afterwards returning in secret to his customary rôle. The princess reveals to her father the secret of the unknown warrior's identity, but he refuses to believe her. After two more battles, in each of which Robert performs a similar service, the princess produces as proof of her assertion a portion of the weapon which Robert had withdrawn from his wound. Robert's identity is established, and he is released from his vow and restored to his rightful station.

In the *Prose Lancelot* the incident of the madness is not, as in

(*Sprachliche Untersuchung des Abenteuerromans Robert le Diable*, Ph. D. diss., Göttingen, 1918), places it in the first quarter of the thirteenth century—possibly as early as 1200.

Robert le Diable, an integral part of the story. It is simply one of the miscellaneous adventures that befall Lancelot in the course of his wanderings. Lancelot has gone mad for love of Guenevere. After wandering about in the forest, he enters a city (Corbenyc), where he is set upon by a howling mob. He flees through the streets, and at length finds refuge in the castle of a noble. Here he remains in the position of court fool. One day he falls asleep in the garden, and the daughter of the nobleman—Helaine—approaches and recognizes him. She informs her father of her discovery, but is not believed. At last she induces the father to go with her to the garden, where he is convinced that it is indeed Lancelot. He then has Lancelot cured by means of the Holy Grail.

The similarity between the two incidents begins with the description of Lancelot's behavior during his love-madness, and continues up to the time he regains his sanity, as will appear from the following parallels. The passages quoted from the *Prose Lancelot* are continuous except for short omissions of a few words each at lines 10 and 14.

Prose Lancelot, Pt. IV, 399

11. 4 ff.

Et quant il entra ou castel si le
tindrent li enfant a fol.

si li geterent la boe et lez torchons

Et il les batoit et getoit en la boe.

Et il le cachoient aual la vile . Et
il ala tant de rue en rue . que il
[s]en vint iusques a la maistre
forteresce.

Si entra laiens. Et il li auint si
bien que on estoit assis au mangier
pour le disner ou palais.

Robert le Diable

v 918

Si tost com il entre en la porte,
.
Tuit chil de Rome a fol le tienent;

v. 928

De tai, de boe et de longange,
.
Le ruent et batent et fierent.

v. 933

Et cil. . .
Sovent lor guenchist et trestorne
Et fait sanblant de tous tuer,

v. 959

Lors s'en vait fuiant sans retor
Amont droit vers la maistre tor,

v. 1030

Vers le palais s'est avoiés,
U l'enperere estoit assis
Al mangier, a haut dois assis.

*Prose Lancelot**Robert le Diable*

si le connurent cil de laiens a fol.

v. 1051

Quant l'enperere a conneü
Robert a fol et conseü,

si li donnerent a mangier

v. 1053

As huissiers crie

Or li doinst on de la viande.

v. 1135

Et il qui grant mestier en auoit
manga moult volentiers.

Puis le mangüe volentiers:

v. 1182

Et quant il fu saisons de reposer
si se traist vers vne estable . et se
coucha sour vn petit de fuerre et
si dormi.

Quant [the dog] fu saous, si
s'en va leus
Par desous un degré gesir.

Delés le chien Robers se couche,

Il [the Emperor] a commandé
qu'on i voist
Aporter feure, e strain et paille.

v. 1324

Et ensi seiourna ill[u]ec tout
luier & tout leste apres

... il mena bien cele bataille
Dis ans entor l'enpereor,

v. 1345

Si ni ot onques celui qui le recon-
neust.

... et si se cevre
Que nus ne savoit nient de
s'evre

... tant se covri
Qu'a nului ne s'en descovri,

v. 1355

N'onques hom son non ne savoit
Ne de lui savoir ne pooit
Dont il soit ne de quel país.

v. 1367

... si auoient souuent grant ioie
et rioient ades de ses folours .
qui[1] li veoient faire.

De lui mout li [the emperor]
plest la folie,
Ses fès et sa malencolie,
Car rire le fait et festir.

v. 1312

L'enperere en rit leement
Et tuit li autre qui la sont;
Grant joie et grant deduit en ont.

Prose Lancelot

Et on li donnoit souuent des vieses
reubes as sergans et as escuiers.

From this point the parallels in detail are somewhat less close but the general course of events continues to be similar. A summary follows:

Prose Lancelot

One day Lancelot falls asleep beside a fountain in the garden, where his patron's daughter and her maidens were accustomed to disport themselves.

Here Helaine finds and recognizes him.

She tells her father of her discovery. He refuses to believe her.

She brings her father to the garden and proves her story.

Lancelot is restored to sanity by means of the Holy Grail.

Robert le Diable

v. 1381

De lui ont mervelleus deduit:
De teus folies se sont duit
A faire les beles folies.

v. 1370

Il le fait cascun jor vestir
De boine cote a caperon.

Robert le Diable

Robert goes every day to drink of a fountain in the garden, which is situated under the window where the emperor's daughter is accustomed to sit.

She sees Robert praying in the garden and realizes that he is not what he seems.

She tells her father of her discovery. He refuses to believe her.

She proves her statement by producing the weapon which Robert had withdrawn from his wound.

Robert is released from his vow of pretended insanity by an emissary from heaven.

The similarities listed above show clearly that there is some relation between the two incidents. It is impossible to establish the relative priority of the two romances on the basis of a known date of composition; neither romance can be dated with precision, and both are generally attributed to the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century.* But from even a casual reading of the two texts it is evident that *Robert le Diable* might easily have furnished the source of the *Prose Lancelot* incident, while the

* For the date of *Robert le Diable*, see above, p. 379, n. 5. Scholars differ widely as to the date, or dates, of the *Prose Lancelot*. Bruce (*op. cit.*, I, 452), places this romance "in some form" in the closing years of the twelfth century.

reverse could not possibly have occurred. In *Robert le Diable*, the pretense of madness is clearly original in the story; it is the nucleus of a unified and skillfully constructed plot, which would be meaningless without this central incident. In the *Prose Lancelot*, on the contrary, Lancelot's madness is merely one of a succession of detached incidents which, drawn from many and varied sources, are loosely strung together without regard to any central plot. It seems probable, therefore, that *Robert le Diable* was the source of the *Prose Lancelot* incident.

It may be questioned whether this similarity might not be explained by a common derivation from a folktale motif. It is extremely unlikely that this is the case. It would be most surprising to find in two literary incidents, each independently derived from the same oral source, a perfect correspondence between the most minute and insignificant details; furthermore, the fact that these details occur in the same order is strong evidence against a common oral source for the two episodes.

We must, therefore, conclude that the author of this portion of the *Prose Lancelot* used as a main source for the incident of Lancelot's madness either the romance of *Robert le Diable*, or conceivably an earlier version of the Robert the Devil story which corresponded to the extant romance in all essential details.

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